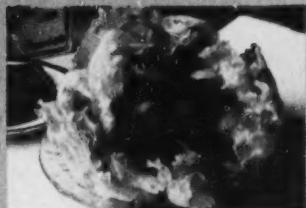


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JUNE 24, 1987

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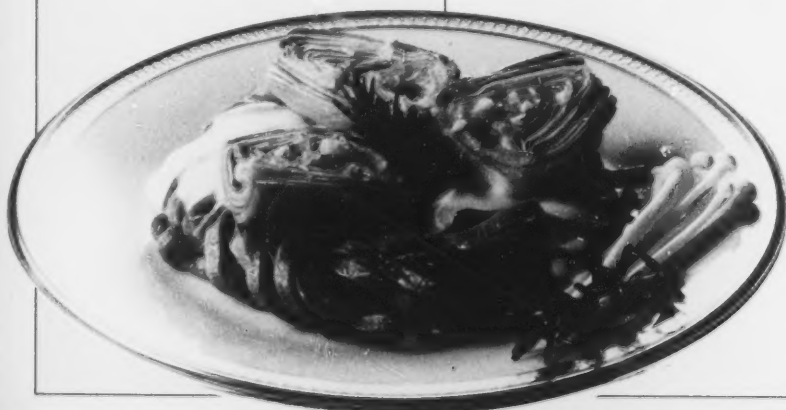
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COVER STORY

■ TRENDS

Mangiare Fantastico! An Italian Renaissance



**Ray (L.) and Frank Capitanini,
Florentine Room, Chicago**

By Nancy Ross Ryan

Sometimes the bigger the trend, the harder to spot—a case of not being able to see the forest for the trees. Consider Italian food: America is in the midst of the biggest Italian food renaissance since Caterina de Medici brought a culinary dowry of 50 Italian chefs to the French court of King Henry II in the 16th century. Italian food—as we have known it—has been a top American favorite ever since market research started to track menu trends. It still is (see “Unlimited Pastabilities,” this feature). But today’s transformation of an old favorite into a new trend calls forth all styles of Italian cookery, south as well as north.

Eager patrons of the Italian culinary arts are the new breed of American diners—more widely traveled, more sophisticated and much more adventure-

some than their pizza-pie-loving predecessors. They have just tasted a small sample of the ancient and regionally rich cuisine that is Italy’s. And whetting their appetites for more are the leading architects of today’s Italian renaissance: chefs, food writers, fine-dining restaurateurs, full-service chains and culinary schools.

Italian restaurateurs with fine-dining restaurants are natural artisans of this renaissance. From Anthony May in New York (Palio, La Camelia, Sandro’s), to Piero Selvaggio in Los Angeles (Valentino’s, Primi), and Frank and Ray Capitanini in Chicago (the Florentine Room), Italian restaurateurs have consistently challenged their customers’ palates by pushing their menu boundaries a step or two ahead of current taste.

The Florentine Room is one of three separate restaurants in The Italian Village in Chicago’s theatre district, a free-standing, three-story family restaurant complex founded in 1927 by Alfredo Capitanini, now 88 years old and affectionately known as “Nonno” (grandfather) to his sons and grandchildren. Although the Florentine Room currently holds *The Wine Spectator* Grand Award for Excellence for its two-volume wine list with (at this writing) more than 900 wines, 400 of them Italian, and the seasonal cuisine has received rave reviews from local critics, Frank and Ray say their father “was always a trendsetter. The Village was the first in Chicago to serve *Saltimbocca alla Romano*, cannelloni, manicotti and



RESTAURANTS & INSTITUTIONS



Florentine Room Chef Nina Nicolai (l.) and one of her appetizers from the spring menu (below), Coniglio Ripieno, rolled stuffed rabbit with (sweet) red pepper sauce. The Florentine Room menu is seasonal, changing four times yearly. The wine list has more than 400 Italian wines, but the menu suggests two wines appropriate to each entree.

Fred Ashtari, maitre d',
Florentine Room



DISCOVERING ITALIAN WINES

According to Patrick W. Fegan of the Chicago Wine School, there are good reasons why Italian wine consumption in the United States has been concentrated on sweeter Lambrusco and inexpensive Chianti-types. "Complicated wine names, unfamiliar grape varieties, lack of education and a low marketing profile have kept the more complex, interesting Italian wines obscure in American minds," says Fegan—even though Italian wines are now America's leading imports.

The following are Fegan's picks:

White: Chardonnays from the Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Trentino regions; experimental wines aged in small French oak from the Piedmont, Tuscany and Veneto regions. Go well with fish, chicken or veal in rich sauces. Pinot Grigio, dry, often reasonably priced wine from the north, a summer wine that goes well with seafood, chicken and light pasta. Other summer wines: Riesling, Pinot Bianco.

Red: Sangiovese from the Chianti hills makes heavier wines. Goes well with polenta, meats, heavier pastas. Estate Chianti Classico, an aged Chianti that is tangy, sturdy without being heavy. Goes with roast lamb and dishes with cheese. Dolcetto is a light, dry, Beaujolais-like wine. Goes well with antipasto. Experimental reds worth noting: Tignanello, Sassicaia, Solaia, Flaccianello, Il Grifi and La Pergola Torte.



ITALIAN REVIVAL

Midscale, full-service chains introduce new customers to Italian food—fine dining.

semifreddo. He was making his own pasta in 1948."

Because their father was a trendsetter, he supports innovation in the second generation (Frank and Ray) and the third generation (Alfredo, Frank Jr. and Gina, Frank's sons and daughter) who now operate The Village. Innovation recreated the Florentine Steak Room, opened in 1961, as the Florentine Room in 1983, with a new seasonal a la carte menu and a \$35 dinner check average. The menu consultant is a poorly kept trade secret: Giuliano Bugialli, Italian chef, author, food historian and culinary arts teacher. Bugialli also worked with Florentine Room chef, Nina Nicolai, who came in 1983 (after training at Cordon Bleu, London, and

cooking at the Ritz Hotel, Paris). "Bugialli," says Ray, "came in through the front door as Nina was coming in the back. He is reluctant to have his name associated with any restaurant—for fear the recipes won't be properly prepared—and he says: 'You can't fool me. I have only to come back and taste the food to know whether the basic preparations are being done right!'"

"He gave us the key," says Ray. "As the season goes, so goes the food. And what is new is really very old. Some of the recipes on our menu researched by Bugialli go back for hundreds of years. What we are doing here—in this country—may not be going on in Italy."

"Although," says Frank, "Italians in general don't believe that our restaura-

rants over here compare with theirs. They believe if they traveled through America and had to eat Italian food, they'd starve to death! They put their faith in a good steak, a baked potato and they hope Italian restaurants in our major cities will take care of them."

The Capitaninis' comments on Italian food and wine today and tomorrow include, Espresso: "In Italy it's not served with lemon peel. Maybe that's America's version of *poncino*, espresso laced with a liqueur and served with a twist and a sugar cube. And cappuccino—in Italy it's only for breakfast. If you ask for it after 11 a.m., they'll know you're a tourist. But Americans fell in love with cappuccino. God bless Americans! They fell in love with pasta, which Italians eat as a first course, not an entree."

Regional cooking: "Italy, as a nation, is a little over 100 years old. Regionality is very strong, and so is regional pride: *campanilismo*—that means my area is the best. Italians would be flabbergasted by our wine list because it shows the best of Italy, not just one region."

Italian wines: "We're looking for people who say, 'I don't know much about Italian wines,' because what they will get here is a good bottle of wine for a good price. We've done our homework: tasted the wines, stored them properly and bought at the right times. We have a good cellar now and can ride with it when the prices are high."

Lighter fare, fewer courses: are what the Capitaninis feel that Americans will be eating at the Italian restaurant table compared to the traditional Italian dinner table. But they credit growing nutritional awareness rather than the outcropping of grazing-style Italian restaurants. "The chic, trendy interpretations of Italian cuisine—are they Italian? Not to us. They may be using Italian ingredients, but from there, fantasy takes over."

Italian growth segment: The Capitaninis are unanimous in their feelings that the growth in Italian food, retail and restaurants will continue. And that major restaurant growth will come



The popularity of pizza (thin-crust and deep-dish) paved the way for Italian cousins: calzone, focaccia and even designer pizzas.

& RESTAURANTS INSTITUTIONS



The Olive Garden's signature spaghetti dinner

from the chains. "They know a good thing when they see it. And big corporations have the money to do things right. We visited The Olive Garden in West Palm Beach, (Fla.) recently and were pleasantly surprised. What they are presenting to the public is very good. The satellite Italian restaurants will help give people an introduction to Italian food, and they will only bring us more customers."

Bill Lombardo, director of marketing for The Olive Garden, General Mills' mid-priced, full-service, 54-unit Italian dinner-house concept agrees: "The average mid-price-range diner has not been aware of quality Italian

food. We have priced and portioned fresh Italian foods so this can be an everyday dining experience. We have a very friendly menu—in English. Customers can be inhibited by Italian names for menu items, and not feel comfortable ordering. But after eating at The Olive Garden for awhile, I think customers would feel much more comfortable with an upscale Italian menu and restaurant."

The Olive Garden is the single biggest growth vehicle in General Mills at this time, with average unit volumes at \$2.5 million. And although expanding rapidly now—at the rate of 40 new restaurants a year for the next three years until the target of 200 in 1991—it got off to a deliberate slow start. "We had Red Lobster, a very successful restaurant. In the late '70s, General Mills asked the question: 'Is there an idea like it for attracting a breadth of customers on a continuing basis?'" To answer the question, General Mills chose two key people, one with a background in marketing research, the other with a combined operations and marketing background, and left them to work on it for two years.

The Olive Garden No. 1 opened in December 1982, in Orlando, Fla. The second unit didn't open until November 1983. During that first year, says Lombardo, "We continued to change variables and we looked at what was going in the restaurant, adjusting menu, service, decor—all based on our research with actual customers."

By mid-1985, only four units were

continued on page 44



Louisville-based Grisanti's Casual Italian Restaurant is playing a quality, not a quantity, game. Concept is mid-priced, family oriented.



FRESH CHAIN APPROACH

Midscale Italian chains with a fresh approach to watch include:

Florenz Restaurants: Lexington, Ky., (Jerrico) has four units; plans four more in 1987.

Grisanti's Casual Italian Restaurant: Louisville, Ky., (Grisanti's Inc., a division of IMASCO USA) has four units. Expansion through locating quality sites.

The Olive Garden: Orlando, Fla., (General Mills) has 54 units in 12 states. Plans to add 40 new units annually. Target: 200 units by 1991.

Old Spaghetti Factory: Portland, Ore., has 24 units.

The Pasta House Co.: St. Louis. has 23 units.

Rossini's Ristorantes: Cleveland, two restaurants in a new Italian dinner-house chain opened by former Chi-Chi's employees. Plans expansion; negotiating for additional sites.

Sbarro: Commack, N.Y., has 202 units (company and franchised) in United States, Canada and Puerto Rico. A family-style cafeteria serving more than pizza and pasta.

Rax Restaurants: Columbus, Ohio, no longer calls its salad bar the endless salad bar. The pasta bar has been added offering four pastas, three sauces, garlic toast, cheeses and soups.

ITALIAN REVIVAL

Second time around: Americans rediscover Italian food—and fall in love again.

opened, all in Florida. Not until July of that year did The Olive Garden move into a second market in Indianapolis.

"We took time early on to develop tools to replicate quality. We concentrated on systems and timing and a lot of testing. We are making our own soups and sauces from scratch, and we bake our own bread sticks." (Salad, served family style, and bread sticks are two signature items that, along with soup and non-alcoholic beverages, are offered on an unlimited-refill basis.)

Menu prices for a full dinner range from \$5 to \$12. Menu items range from spaghetti with marinara sauce to Venetian Grilled Chicken, fresh fish of the day, Chicken Marsala and Veal Piccata. The Olive Garden's full bar offers

up to 16 varietal wines by the glass.

"People don't believe we are a chain. We will provide menu variations and food preparation variations to suit customers' needs, and we'll even prepare off-menu items within reason.

"That has been," Lombardo concludes, "One of the big mistakes chains have made. In an attempt to systematize, they forgot the customers."

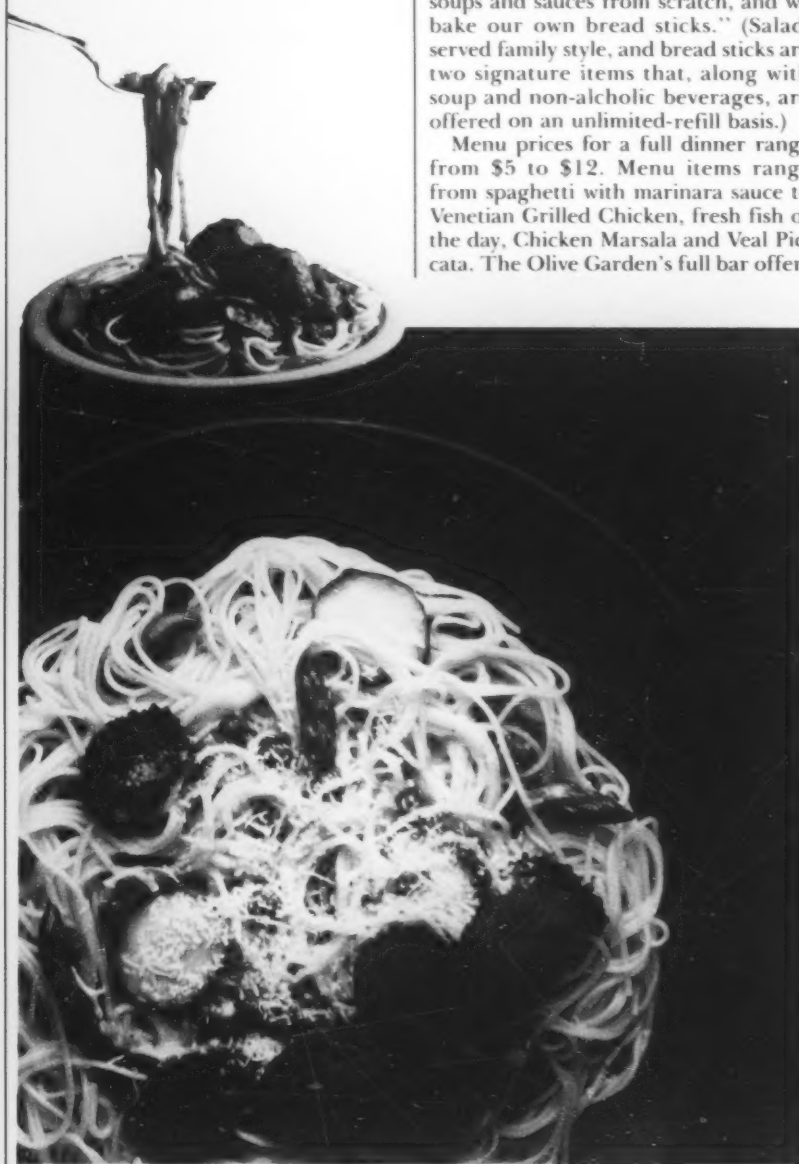
And that is a mistake that Michael Grisanti is determined not to make with his Louisville, Ky.-based mid-priced Italian dinner-house chain Grisanti's (a result of the December '84 merger with IMASCO USA). "We're striving for quality in food and hospitality that we can replicate in other cities. We're not in a numbers game," says Michael Sadofsky, director of marketing. "We are looking for quality sites that fit our profile—and that will determine how many Grisanti's Casual Italian Restaurants we will open."

Michael Grisanti owns and operates the award-winning Casa Grisanti (Louisville, 1959), Mama Grisanti's (Louisville, 1976), 6th Avenue (Louisville, 1981) and Mama Grisanti's (Bloomington, Ind., 1983). Mama Grisanti's was the basis for Grisanti's, a midscale, family, casual Italian concept with \$4.95 to \$10.95 dinner entrees (top-priced menu item is a steak at \$12.95). "We have more for children," says Sadofsky. "For example, the children's menu, when rolled up, becomes a small toque that they can wear."

Signature items at Grisanti's include Tuscan-style bread served and kept warm on a tray heated by a candle warmer, and accompanied by a spicy marinara sauce for dipping.

"We're going to see an expansion of the entire Italian food category—in retail and in restaurants," says Sadofsky. "We're no threat to fine dining, we have our own concept. We're looking for everyday dining. And we don't think we have a fad. Italian food has been around and will continue to grow—if it is done well."

Helping to make sure that Italian food is done right is a New York-based group of Italian restaurateurs with na-



Spaghetti and meatballs, an all-time favorite, is joined by fettuccine primavera.

& RESTAURANTS INSTITUTIONS



Osso Bucco, Caterina de Medici restaurant, CIA

tionwide membership chaired by Anthony May. Founded in 1979, Gruppo Ristoratori Italiani USA is a non-profit, institutional organization dedicated to the better understanding of Italian cuisine and wines in the United States. "There are some 34,000 restaurants in the United States that call themselves Italian," says May. "But there are fewer than 1,500 that specialize in true Italian cuisine, representing all of Italy. Next to American, Italian is the most popular food in the United States. Yet the many flavors of Italy are unknown to most Americans."

The group has held conventions in Italy and, this month, held its first U.S. convention in New York. GRI provides a \$5,000 annual culinary scholarship and, it has granted more than \$30,000 in curriculum and scholarship funding to the Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, N.Y. The grant effectively underwrote the development of the

CIA's curriculum in Italian cuisine, as taught in the kitchens and dining room of the semi-public Caterina de Medici restaurant there, opened in 1985.

CIA President Ferdinand Metz returned this April from Florence where he accepted for the CIA the Caterina de Medici Award for educational efforts from the Federation of Italian Chefs and the Chefs' Union of Tuscany. (Other award recipients included Roger Vergé.) Says Metz, "The major trend that I see in this country is part of the effort we are making and that is to put in the minds of the consumer that Italian food is so much more than we give it credit for. At the Caterina de Medici we teach an elevated understanding of Italian cooking in a quality restaurant setting. They graduate from here with the idea that Italian cooking can be as good as you want it to be."

Metz points out that the restaurant, open for dinner to the public, is the only CIA restaurant that they do not advertise during slow months because it always is overbooked. At lunch time, students enrolled in the Italian cuisine curriculum are assigned to eat there, because, "Part of learning how to cook is learning how to eat. Italian is a simple cuisine and that's what makes it challenging. . . to achieve simplicity with elegance."

In pages that follow, *Restaurants & Institutions* takes a look at one of America's favorite Italian foods—pizza, and two family-owned and -operated Italian restaurants that demonstrate the diversity of Italian restaurants in America.



At the Culinary Institute of America, Italian cuisine is a full curriculum. In the Caterina de Medici kitchens, students learn what CIA President Metz calls "an elevated understanding of Italian cooking."



UNLIMITED PASTABILITIES

How popular is Italian food with Americans? In 1986, 70.3% of consumers surveyed in *R&I's* annual Tastes of America poll said they ordered Italian food when eating out.

According to restaurateurs and food-service operators surveyed in *R&I's* 1987 Menu Census, menu items listed as "good sellers" included (percentage of respondents follows menu item):

Pasta with sauce . . .	83.2%
Spaghetti with sauce . . .	82.9
Pizza . . .	82.8
Spaghetti with meatballs . . .	81.9
Lasagna . . .	79.4
Pasta salad . . .	65.1
Stuffed shells . . .	60.9
Stuffed pizza/calzone . . .	56.2

"Best-selling" menu items added last year included:

Lasagna . . .	3.4%
Pasta salad as entree . . .	2.4
Fettuccine . . .	1.7
Pasta salad as salad . . .	4.4

Of all respondents, 83.1% said they had an Italian dish on the menu; 75.3% said they served pasta.

Of those surveyed, 17.9% said that Italian food is of growing importance in menu planning.

ITALIAN REVIVAL



PIZZA PIE: IT'S AMORE!

Popular pizza—how do we love thee? Let us count the ways: Thin crust, thick crust, deep-dish, rolled, folded and stuffed. With cheese and sausage, tomato sauce, tomatoes, pepperoni, mushrooms, onions, green peppers, anchovies, bacon, spinach.

Proof positive: Seven of the top 50 restaurant chains in the United States are pizza chains. Of those seven, the following five have shown above industry-average growth:

Chain	\$MM sales 1986	% growth '85-'86
Pizza Hut (Pepsico)	\$2,503.4*	+12%
Domino's	1,500	+38%
Little Caesar's	770	+126%
Pizza Inn**	269.7	+6%
Round Table Pizza	250	+27%

* R/I estimate ** Being acquired by Pantera's
Source: Chains 50, 1986, Restaurants & Institutions,
a Cohners Publication.

From caveman to California: Pizza has come a long, long way.

Pizza, like pasta, has an ancient pedigree. And today's California designer pizzas can trace their lineage to the earliest pizza-like bread baked by Neolithic tribes in parts of Italy before 1000 B.C. According to Evelyne Slomon in "The Pizza Book," (Times Books, 1984) these ancient tribes baked a crude batter of wild grains on hot campfire stones, then filled them and ate them. Around 1000 B.C., the Etruscans arrived in the area, and baked a slightly more refined mush on stones beneath the ashes of the fire, then seasoned the cakes with oil and herbs. This form was adopted by the Romans, who called it *focaccia* (meaning fire-place floor bread), and they introduced it to all the lands they conquered. Slomon claims that the flatbreads of France, and the hearthcakes of Scotland are related to this oldest style of pizza. And to take Slomon's premise one step further, so are California designer pizzas.

While the Greeks—the best bakers in southern Italy between 730 to 130 B.C.—elevated pizza to ancient culinary heights it was the Neapolitans in

the 18th century who added tomato.

And, in 1889, the world's most famous and favorite pizza was invented by Raffaele Esposito who created a tomato, mozzarella and basil pizza honoring the colors of the Italian flag and Italy's Queen Margherita.

America's first pizzeria was opened by Gennaro Lombardi in New York City. In the 1920s, family-run pizzerias sprang up in the northeast, serving thin-crust, New York-style pizza, and in the early 1940s, Chicago-style deep-dish pizza was created by Ike Sewell and Ric Riccardo at Pizzeria Uno, still dishing up deep-dish today. In Postwar New York pizza-by-the-slice became a hot item, and by the '60s pizza was mass-produced and frozen.

The '70s saw the whole wheat crust, health food pizza, and the debut of sophisticated gourmet pizzas.

Today, Americans are discovering new versions of pizza that are really very old: calzone, *panzerotti*, *pitta* (stuffed) and *bonata* (rolled). And, fueled by America's appetite for pizza, who knows what forms will come from tomorrow's ovens? continued on page 50



Pizza was cited as a "good seller" by 82.8% of operators polled in R/I's 1987 Menu Census; stuffed pizza and calzone by 56.2%.

ITALIAN REVIVAL

Potesta's is a mom-and-pop operation with sons, daughters, sisters and grandchildren.



Two generations at work: Frank Potesta (l.) prompts his daughter Joan and her husband Jerry Gruber on proper customer-service routines to ensure prompt completion of orders.



On location: Fran Potesta does KP in the Waukegan, Ill. location of Potesta's Pizza and Pasta, the first of five Potesta family restaurants; a sixth unit is in the works.

The late comedian Jimmy Durante was the furthest topic from Frank Potesta's mind that day in 1974 as Potesta stood outside the small storefront he intended to rent for his first restaurant venture. But Durante's famous line, delivered with a roll of his eyes and an upward tilt of his famous nose, "Wait a minute, wait a minute! Now everybody is trying to get into the act!" would prove prophetic.

In 1974, at age 54, when the midlife crisis waits to ambush anxiety-ridden corporate executives, Frank Potesta, then-vice president and comptroller of an expanding company planning to merge and move, refused to accept a transfer. He stayed behind, jobless, in Grayslake, Ill.

While savings melted away, Potesta juggled thoughts of opening a small business while wondering what product he would sell. The savory aromas from his own dinner plate gave him the answer: his Italian mother's recipes for pasta, embellished by Potesta's inborn culinary talent.

With borrowed capital, the Potesta family settled on a small storefront location in Waukegan, Ill. Since the bookkeeper in Potesta never retired, he calculated just how many pizzas would

support a business and the family. And so Potesta's Pizza and Pasta was modestly launched. Within a year, the popularity of Italian cuisine did the rest. The seating capacity tripled. Fran Potesta hand-sculpted each meatball, stood watch over sauces and precision-timed the cooking of pasta. Her imagination simmered with ideas to perfect traditional southern Italian treats, and she created such menu cornerstones as the Potesta's popular lasagna.

Success led to new family ventures. Under his guidance, Potesta's sister and nephew opened their own restaurant with the more flamboyant name "The Red Noodle."

The Potesta's fifth restaurant, this time in their own building with a parking lot in Hoffman Estates (a large community development near Chicago), is manned by sons Jim and Dave. And the Potestas are remodeling new space for a sixth restaurant, to be managed by son-in-law Niels Prips. In 1986 the Potestas reported a \$2.5 million food-and-beverage sales for their first five sites, a testimony to the foundation on which some of America's most successful and prestigious restaurant companies have been built: strong families.

—Audrey Garvey
continued on page 61



Potesta grandchildren (l. to r.) Mark, Shawn, Elliott and Brian

MENUS

■ R&I DATA

FOOD COST INDEX: COFFEE SHOWS SECOND MONTH OF DECLINING PRICES

The market-basket total is inching its way back up after a low of \$103.37 last month. June total: \$107.65. Coffee imports during January dropped a significant 45% from a year ago to just 1.44 million bags. This brought cumulative imports 23% under 1985/1986 to just 5.8 million bags. The decline in imports is attributable to the larger than normal stocks that roasters in the United States have on hand after making significant purchases last year when prices were advancing rapidly.

		% change		
	6/87	5/87	6/86	
Hamburger (lb. 85% lean)	\$1.24	-2	7	
Chicken (lb. cut for frying)	.79	-24	-12	
N.Y. strip steak (lb./avg.)	3.42	-4	-18	
Bread (Pullman loaf)	.73	-3	-3	
Lettuce (iceberg/head)	.48	-13	-21	
French fries (30 lb.)	1.34	4	-8	
Tomatoes (lb.)	.51	-18	-15	
Milk (gal.)	1.68	2	-8	
Eggs (doz.)	.68	-4	-4	
Peaches (case/#10)	18.22	-1	-2	
Peas (case/#10)	1.33	14	13	
Frozen beans (30 lb.)	15.54	-5	0	
Ice cream (vanilla/gal.)	2.72	-3	-12	
Butter (lb.)	1.48	-3	—	
Cheddar cheese (lb.)	1.63	6	—	
Sugar (100 lb.)	31.13	14	5	
Coffee (lb.)	2.68	-6	-16	
Breaded fish portions (lb.)	1.65	30	15	

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■ FOOD PRICE UPDATE

Steps Taken to Improve Inspection Program

More than 7,000 meat and poultry plants are under federal inspection.

In the wake of an upsurge of criticism of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's meat and poultry inspection program, the director of its Food Safety and Inspection Service, (FSIS), Donald L. Houston, went to Capitol Hill on April 8, to defend it as "one of the most comprehensive public health programs in the world." Currently, more than 7,000 meat and poultry plants are under federal inspection, and the USDA's field force numbers 8,000.

According to a recent article in *The Food Institute Report*, Dr. Houston, testifying before the House Subcommittee on Livestock, Dairy and Poultry, said officials at the department were keenly aware of increasing concern by consumers about possible microbial contamination of meat and poultry.

In partial response to that concern, he said: "... we are developing a proposal that would allow companies to use special labeling if they operate microbiological control programs that use approved techniques to reduce contamination in raw products.

"The agency would monitor the systems and develop microbiological guidelines. We think that such a program would be embraced by many progressive companies. Already, several meat plants are experimenting with organic-acid processes to reduce salmonella.

Dr. Houston said that the FSIS also was striving to improve its surveillance procedures for detecting illegal residues of pesticides and other agricultural chemicals in meat and poultry. "Expected to be 'on-line' within the next few months," he said, "is a computerized Residue Violations Information System that will keep track of residue violations nationwide."

—Kathleen Marshall

Chicken prices are at 79 cents per pound, down 24% from a month ago.



ACTION EXPRESS

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